

A Pastoral Epistle on the Church's Role in Politics and Society

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

In these turbulent times, the Church's role in American society is a matter of deep concern. We are witnessing a fundamental conflict over differing visions of society, not merely about specific policies but about how society should be ordered and what it means to be human.

Consequently, many American Christians today appear to be more focused on the political and societal trajectory of the nation than on the witness and mission of the Church. This preoccupation has elevated politics and social issues to an almost sacred level (for instance, consider how much more "scandalous" it would be in our churches for someone not to vote in a presidential election than it would be for one to neglect regular prayer or scripture reading), often eclipsing the unity and purpose of the Christian community.

As ministers of the gospel, we must navigate these challenges with a clear biblical and theological vision, guiding our flock toward a Christ-centered perspective. We must participate in societal structures with discernment, aware of the risks of being co-opted by worldly ideologies. The Church must remain distinct from the allure of power, whether from the "right" or the "left," instead taking its cue from Christ's rule.

Too often, the Church has been co-opted by this broader societal conflict, with various powers attempting to mislead the Church into believing they are its allies, whether on the "right" or the "left."

On one hand, there is a temptation to enforce a superficial form of Christianity through political means, seeking to control society and impose religious norms by force. This approach risks conflating the Kingdom of God with the pursuit of political power, mistakenly prioritizing the powers of this age over the transformative power of the gospel. It shifts the focus from the radical message of Christ to a form of faith more concerned with maintaining cultural and political influence than embodying the true, sacrificial love that the gospel demands.

On the other hand, there is a temptation to dilute the transformative power of Christ's Kingdom by downplaying or reinterpreting aspects of the Christian faith that are seen as uncomfortable or politically inconvenient. In the pursuit of relevance, often driven by political and ideological pressures, there can be a shift towards a version of faith that aligns more closely with contemporary cultural values than with the foundational truths of the Gospel. This leads to a form of Christianity that risks becoming more of a cultural expression than a true embodiment of Christ's teachings.

Leslie Newbigin warned, "When the message of the kingdom is divorced from the person of Jesus, it becomes a program or an ideology, but not a gospel." The Church in America is increasingly seen as a social, ideological institution rather than the living body of Christ who

follows the reign of the Living Christ—the Lamb who was slain (1 Corinthians 12:27; Revelation 5:12).

These tendencies reveal a deeper problem: a weakened ecclesiology that lacks a solid foundation in Christology. When we fail to grasp the Church's true identity, grounded in the identity of Jesus Christ, we are susceptible to being swayed by societal and political trends. It is crucial for us to anchor ourselves firmly in Scripture and Christian theology, ensuring that our actions and messages remain true to our authentic identity.

The Church plays a pivotal role in shaping how we engage with the world, including politics, society, and culture. The Church of Jesus Christ serves as a witness and foretaste of God's Kingdom, helping us navigate worldly affairs in light of the vision for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. The Church is called to be a sign and instrument of this vision, pointing toward the ideal interactions and structures that God envisions for all humanity in the fullness of the Kingdom. Through this lens, we engage with broader society, advocating for justice, peace, and the common good, informed by Christ's Kingdom.

The Church, by its very nature, is a political community that embodies the ideal unity and social relations to which all communities should aspire. It is not merely an organization but our primary family, city, and nation—a foretaste of the ultimate unity in Jesus that will be fully realized in the new creation (Revelation 21:1-4). The Church's sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist—are political rites of the Spirit. In baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised to new life, made citizens of His Kingdom. The Eucharist is a profound participation in the life of Jesus, including His sacrifice, as we are indwelt by His Spirit. These rites are central to our identity as a distinct, unified community that bears witness to the truth: Jesus is King, and He alone deserves our complete allegiance.

The gospel reveals that the way of getting things done in the world differs dramatically from worldly kingdoms. As the Apostle Paul writes, "But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:23-25, NRSV).

Paul's theology of the cross challenges American Christianity's theologies of glory. While American Christianity has often aligned with worldly success and power, Paul emphasizes that God's Kingdom overcomes the world through self-sacrificial humility and love. The Church is not called to save the world by imposing force but to live out and point to Christ's Kingship, inviting others to repent and believe the gospel.

Our role is not to dominate history but to bear witness to the Lord of history. The Church, confident in the ultimate victory of Jesus' Kingdom, does not resort to an 'ends justify the means' mentality. The way we live out our faith (the means) is as important as the goals we seek (the ends). Christians are called to live in union with Christ, embodying His character and teachings as an expression of our shared life in Him. This union compels us to trust in His sovereignty and the ultimate victory of His Kingdom, rather than resorting to un-Christlike means to achieve any perceived good ends.

With this conviction, we live as “citizens” and “ambassadors” of God’s Kingdom (Philippians 3:20; 2 Corinthians 5:20). Our heavenly citizenship overrides all worldly ties. However, this “heavenly citizenship” is not a disembodied reality—it is the most concrete aspect of our existence. We are called to embody and bear witness to Christ’s Kingdom, making His rule visible through our lives. In this foreign land, we resist conforming to the patterns of this age (Romans 12:2), prioritizing our allegiance to God’s eternal rule above any worldly affiliation.

This is not a call for passive resignation. We are called to work diligently in the world, advocating for Christ’s rule. When we live into the light amid the darkness, we will be hated (John 3:19-20), but we can “rejoice and be glad” knowing that when we are hated for our allegiance to Christ, we will be rewarded (Matthew 5:10-12).

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, I urge you to lead your congregation with this vision. Do not be swayed by the siren call of political power, whether cloaked in right-wing or left-wing ideologies. Let us focus on the biblical and theological mission of the Church: to be a community that lives out the gospel in all its fullness, transcending ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries.

To truly embody our allegiance to Christ, we must be willing to take bold steps. For example,

- We must reject any political party or ideology that demands loyalty over Christ’s teachings. This may require publicly distancing ourselves from political movements or leaders whose actions contradict the gospel, while avoiding partisan bias.
- We must actively challenge and work to dismantle sinful injustice, even if it means opposing cultural norms or risking unpopularity.
- We must cultivate a culture of accountability within our churches, ensuring that loyalty to Christ’s teachings takes precedence, and that any compromise of Christian values for political gain is addressed and corrected.
- We must prioritize actions that demonstrate radical love and humility, even towards those with whom we have political disagreements, making it clear that our ultimate allegiance is to Christ and His Kingdom, not worldly power.

Galatians 3:28 reminds us that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Our identity is in Christ alone, and our allegiance is to His kingdom, which knows no borders and respects no human divisions.

As we navigate these challenging times, may we lead with humility, seeking justice and peace, and keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). In doing so, we will guide God’s people toward the eternal hope found in Christ.

Remember this: The Bible’s most frequent instruction is “Do not be afraid.” Let us not merely teach this, but model it for our people.

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always.